

“Just the sort of place I have always pictured in imagination”: Distance, Space, and  
the Development of a Heterogeneous Irish Theatre

By  
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## Abstract

In the early twentieth century, the Abbey Theatre was established and assumed the role of Ireland's National Theatre. W.B. Yeats and the Abbey's directors participated in the Celtic Revival's construction of Irish-Ireland by creating an aesthetic that idealized the imagined, precolonial peasants residing in the West of Ireland, beyond the reach of modern influences. These peasants were firmly rooted in a Celtic heritage that tied emerging definitions of Irishness to a shared, homogeneous lineage; Catholics in the South and West of Ireland were included in this group, while Protestants and Presbyterians in the North were not. This paper examines the methods by which rival theater companies—specifically the Theatre of Ireland and the Ulster Literary Theatre—tried and failed to introduce a heterogeneous definition of Irishness. The productions explored here include James Cousins' *The Racing Lug*, which attempts to diversify the Irish experience, and Gerald MacNamara's *The Mist That Does Be on the Bog*, which challenges the aesthetic of the Abbey's peasant plays.

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In 1899, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn founded the Irish Literary Theatre (ILT) with the goal of “[building] up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature” that would disassociate Ireland from the “buffoonery” of the Stage Irishman that had exacerbated Irish stereotypes for decades (Gregory 402). The ILT became the literary component of the burgeoning Celtic Revival, using drama to foster an interest in de-Anglicization and nationalism. In 1902, a small theater company from the North took up the ILT’s mission and formed their own company, calling themselves the Ulster Branch of the Irish Literary Theatre in an effort to associate themselves with Yeats’s project. When Yeats heard about it, rather than encouraging the dissemination of his work in the North, he ordered them to stop referring to themselves in a way that suggested affiliation with the ILT. From that point forward, the Ulster Branch of the Irish Literary Theatre was known simply as the Ulster Literary Theatre (ULT), and they began writing and performing their own plays.

Two years later, the Irish National Theatre Society (INTS), headed by Yeats, Gregory, and J.M. Synge, moved into a building on Lower Abbey Street. By calling themselves the National Theatre, the society claimed the right to represent all of Ireland through the works produced on stage at the Abbey Theatre. In 1905, however, the INTS was restructured into a Limited Liability Company, and came to be known as the National Theatre Society (NTS). This move was significant because it placed decision-making powers almost solely in the hands of the Abbey’s directors: Yeats, Gregory, and J.M. Synge. The directors owned the majority of shares and used their power to create a hierarchy in which actors and other members of the NTS were disenfranchised. Where actors had previously been given a role in deciding which plays would be produced, they were now employees receiving a salary from the NTS’s British patroness, Annie Horniman. Many of the actors feared Horniman’s influence might “interfere with the

theatre's nationalist goals," which caused the rift between the actors and the directors to grow (Ritschel 17).

Tension between the directors and the other members of the NTS was further heightened by the fact that the newly established hierarchy seemed to be rooted in differentiations in class and religion. The three directors were wealthy, Anglo-Irish Protestants, while the acting troupe was primarily made up of working-class Catholics. Nevertheless, the NTS maintained their staff, and the Abbey continued to produce plays. By late 1905, however, Yeats's "autocratic scheming behind the scenes" became too much for the NTS employees to bear; many "joined forces with Edward Martyn, who since 1902 had been a vocal opponent of the rural-based dramas that Yeats offered," and split off to create the Theatre of Ireland (Ritschel 17). This new company was "rooted in democratic principles," treating all members as equals in a way that was "reminiscent of the spirit of cooperation in the early INTS" (Vandeveldt "Alternative" 96). Most of the NTS acting troupe moved to the Theatre of Ireland, as did playwrights and nationalist leaders like Padraic Colum, James Cousins, and Constance Markievicz.

### **The Abbey Theatre**

By 1905, three theater companies had emerged—the NTS, the Theatre of Ireland, and the ULT. Each hoped to participate in the Celtic Revival as representatives of Ireland, using the stage to define their version of a national identity. It is at this point that concepts of space, distance, and landscape became central to the question of who gets to define Irishness for the Irish population. Whichever group successfully captured Irish audiences would set the tone for Revivalist Ireland and be granted the opportunity to, in many senses, create the new Ireland. The real and imagined geographies constructed by Yeats and the NTS promoted a homogeneous nationalism that structured Irishness in a way that blatantly excludes diverse populations from

the accepted image of Irishness. The Theatre of Ireland and the ULT attempted to combat this univocal construction of Irishness in different ways, though each strove to expand upon the limited nature of Yeats's "Irish-Ireland." Ultimately, despite these attempts to redefine Irishness for the theatergoing public, it was again space and geography that allowed Yeats to create a homogeneous Irish nationalism and maintain control of it.

By the early twentieth century, Yeats had already established a nationalist aesthetic that relied heavily on the Dublin population's willingness to participate in imagining a very particular landscape stretching out to the West. He used the stage to construct his version of the precolonial Irish culture that belonged to this landscape, which was untainted by British influence. Thus, the move toward constructing Irish-Ireland required Dublin's nationalists to look beyond the city limits for inspiration. Situated as it is on the east coast of Ireland, closest to the seat of British Imperial power, Dublin was subject to outside cultural influences and was therefore considered "less Irish" than those rural spaces to the West which, it was presumed, remained largely untouched by the world. Fintan O'Toole notes that the entire nationalist movement "always had the character of a revolt against the metropolis London, and its satellite as the centre of British domination in Dublin" (111). Yeats's tendency to set his plays in the West is indicative of this mindset; by distancing his landscape from Dublin, he eliminates the city and modernity from his interpretation of Irish-Ireland. His focus on the West allows him to employ the distance between metropolitan audiences and the imagined peasantry in the hinterlands to fictionalize and improve upon those spaces in ways that cast Ireland as "the home of an ancient idealism," as proposed in the ILT's manifesto (Gregory 402).

The physical landscape of Western Ireland, portrayed by either cottage sets or suggestions of what lay immediately outside the cottage door, played a role in establishing a



fixed, imaginary location for Dublin audiences. In 1901, Douglas Hyde's *The Twisting of the Rope* became the first play to utilize the cottage set, though it soon became as familiar to regular theatergoers as their own homes after it was normalized to include an open hearth stage right, a china hutch against the back wall, a table and chairs, and a seat near the fire (Clarke 123). In most cases the interior of the cottage made up the entirety of the set, so when a character left the home they left the stage as well. Rather than attempting to capture Ireland's sweeping vistas on painted backdrops, plays set in the West typically relied on characters' descriptions of what lay outside the door. In Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, which set the standard for the peasant plays that followed, Patrick looks out the window and interprets the landscape for Peter:

PETER. What is the sound I hear?

PATRICK. I don't hear anything. [*He listens.*] I hear it now. It's like cheering.

[*He goes to the window and looks out.*] I wonder what they are cheering about. I don't see anybody.

PETER. It might be a hurling.

...

PATRICK [*who is still at the window*]. There's an old woman coming down the road ... She's turned into the gap that goes down where Maurteen and his sons are shearing sheep. (Yeats 3-4)

The audience's understanding of the West that exists just beyond the cottage set is relayed by means of Patrick's description, which reinforces the commonplace occurrence of quintessentially Irish pastimes—like hurling—that take place amidst postcard portrayals of bucolic country roads cutting through green fields dotted with sheep. When repeated as a convention in the peasant plays that followed, the Abbey's playwrights created a fixed and recognizable West that had

been invented by Yeats, described by his peasants, and taken up in the collective imagination of his audience.

The idealization of the West was facilitated by the fact that few Dubliners who attended the Abbey's plays, and indeed few who had a hand in staging them, were familiar with the non-urban Ireland that existed outside Dublin. According to Nelson Ó Ceallaigh Ritschel:

most of the Dubliners who participated in the Irish theatre movement between 1902 and 1916 had little direct experience with rural Ireland. Obviously, Lady Gregory, with her Coole Park estate, was in the extreme minority, but few could have afforded to explore Aran, Galway, Mayo, and Kerry, as did Synge, ... or benefited, as did Yeats, from either childhood summers on the Sligo coast or Gregory's direct rurally minded influence and assistance. (18)

In her study of literary depictions of rural Ireland, Oona Frawley notes that even Lady Gregory's estate in Galway—admittedly a Western space—could be called an “obvious [hub] of cultural activity,” which may thus “be perceived as [an] urban [outpost]” (81). Rather than damaging their ethos, however, this fact put the Abbey's directors at a distinct advantage, as it allowed them to construct a rural Ireland that was part experience and part imagination without the risk of encountering accusations of inauthenticity.

While “the experiences of the majority of the Irish theatre movement's participants were almost completely confined to Dublin, Belfast, or Cork,” there were several nationalists involved in the theatre movement who had grown up outside of Ireland's urban centers, and who were aware of the liberties being taken by Yeats, Gregory, and Synge (Ritschel 18). T.C. Murray wrote 15 plays for the Abbey, but it wasn't until late in his career that he discussed the inauthenticity of the peasant plays:

I knew the Irish Catholic peasant from my childhood, and while the work of Yeats and Synge and Lady Gregory charmed my imagination, I could never recognize the characters that moved on their stage as counterparts of the country-folk of South Munster, to which I belonged. They created, these three, a peasant world of their own, and one surrendered to it as to the mood of an old folktale. It offered some kind of escape from the humdrum commerce of everyday life. (qtd. in Owens & Radner 167)

According to Murray, much of what appeared on stage at the Abbey was an admittedly artificial rendering of Ireland's peasants meant to appeal to an urban population that felt increasingly distanced from the rural in the midst of modern city life. Those who knew better were content to let the false representations stand in the name of a nationalist movement largely based on the desire to distance Ireland from the negative portrayals of Irishness disseminated throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like the buffoonery of the stage Irishman, or the simianized Fenians regularly depicted in London's *Punch Magazine*. In reaction to the characteristics foisted on them by outsiders, Yeats and the Abbey rejected the archetype of the Stage Irishman and replaced it with that of the ideal peasant. This single representation of Irishness was, for Yeats, enough to represent all of Ireland.

In his study of Yeats's role in structuring the nation in the early twentieth century, Rached Khalifa notes that "at this stage of political consciousness, ... [Yeats] excessively values the notion of 'Unity of Culture' ... at the expense of national diversity," and believes that "singularity rather than plurality ... must make up the *essence* of a nation" (284-85). By controlling the nation's perception of the peasantry and creating a static image of the West, Yeats was able to build and populate a landscape that existed only in the collective imagination of

those who lived too far from the West to note the gap between fantasy and reality. Despite the fact that Yeats's belief in the importance of presenting a single version of Irishness involved fictionalizing the rural experience, the directors of the NTS wanted the staged West to be what Mark Phelan calls a "reproduction of authenticity" (237). By meticulously assembling sets and costumes that mirrored the traditional styles found in the West, they attempted to accurately portray the conditions of the peasant lifestyle. In fact, the NTS was so preoccupied with the "recreation" of the West that they strove to embody as many of its characteristics as possible. Since the buffoonery of the stage Irishman was closely tied to a "stereotype of ... dialect," actors at the Abbey spent hours each day practicing Western speech patterns and tones in an attempt to eliminate the "distinctly adenoidal quality of the true Dublin accent" (Clarke 41, 42).

Additionally, props like "Cloaks, spinning wheels, [and] pampooties" (rustic rawhide shoes) were brought in from the West "to furnish the Abbey sets and thus heighten the 'reality effect' of a peasant mise en scène on the metropolitan stage" (Phelan 237). Synge was so concerned with the correct and authentic use of these props—the spinning wheel in particular—that at one point he suggested Sarah Allgood, the actress who played Pegeen Mike in the premiere of *Playboy of the Western World*, "should learn to spin so that there may be no fake about the show" (Synge qtd. in Clarke 58). Regardless of the measures taken to portray a realistic Western peasantry, however, it was still the case that it took effort for the Dublin actors to shed their urban identities and learn the customs of Irish-Ireland; the constructed West was akin to a foreign country for most Dubliners. Yeats, Gregory, and Synge merely had to explain their version of life in the West, the NTS staff replicated it on stage, and the Dublin theatergoing public took it as fact; in this way, the peasant became a symbol of Irish-Ireland.

Physical distance between the object and the audience allowed the Abbey playwrights to take liberties with their interpretation of the peasantry, but it is important to note that the version of the peasantry that was disseminated throughout modern Dublin also played on notions of temporal distance. The West, in its separation from urban centers, was often conceived of as precolonial. Since British control of Ireland extends as far back as the twelfth century, the idea that the NTS could help Dubliners “remember” a precolonial Ireland suggests a place not only in the past, but existing somehow outside of time. In his 1937 anthropological study of Western peasants, Conrad Arensberg explains that in the rural areas of the South and West, “The industrial revolution has passed ... Ireland by” (147). Closing the distance between the urban and the rural, then, not only constitutes a physical shift from one space to another, but also involves movement through imaginary constructions of time. Despite Dublin’s collective agreement that the peasant is inherently “more Irish” than any urban-dweller could hope to be, this shared imagination holds that the peasant archetype should only exist at a specific axis of space and time: at a distance from the city and in the past. The sense that the peasant exists at both a physical and temporal distance from Dublin audiences was yet another factor that allowed playwrights to take liberties with their construction of the Abbey aesthetic.

### **The Theatre of Ireland**

By the time the Theatre of Ireland began performing its first plays in 1909, the peasant play had been established as the theatrical aesthetic that best embodied the spirit of the Revival. Therefore, the Theatre of Ireland was necessarily less experimental in their deviation from Yeats’s formula due to the fact that they were competing for the same audiences that had already been indoctrinated to Yeats’s version of the West. Despite this obstacle, they nevertheless attempted to broaden the genre’s appeal by offering glimpses of non-Catholic, non-Western Irish

men and women who possess the same ideal qualities as Yeats's peasants. James Cousins' *The Racing Lug*, for instance, is set in "A North of Ireland fishing village" and centers on a pious Presbyterian family (39). Aside from these variations on the Abbey formula, however, the plot and conventions align closely with Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Synge's peasants suffer in the far West of the Aran Islands rather than in a Northern fishing village, and his long-suffering peasant women are mourning for the last of eight men in their family to drown rather than the sole male figure. In both plays, however, the women are left to mourn the dead and carry on without a provider. In a scene from *Riders to the Sea*, Maurya enters the house after failing to bestow a bit of bread and her blessing on her last son, Bartley. As she discusses this failure with her two daughters, she tells them of a vision she had while watching him ride off to what she presumes will be his death:

MAURYA (*with a weak voice*). My heart's broken from this day.

CATHLEEN (*as before*). Did you see Bartley?

MAURYA. I seen the fearfulest thing.

CATHLEEN (*leaves her wheel and looks out*). God forgive you; he's riding the mare now over the green head, and the gray pony behind him.

MAURYA (*starts, so that her shawl falls back from her head and shows her white tossed hair. With a frightened voice*). The gray pony behind him.

CATHLEEN (*coming to the fire*). What is it ails you, at all?

MAURYA (*speaking very slowly*). I've seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen, since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms...I went down to the spring well, and I stood there saying a prayer to myself. Then Bartley came along, and he riding on the red mare with the gray pony

behind him. (*She puts up her hands, as if to hide something from her eyes.*)

The Son of God spare us, Nora! (63-4)

Maurya possesses an omniscient sense of dread; though she has no specific reason to suspect it, she is aware that Bartley's death is imminent. As her daughters look out the window to report on Bartley's progress toward the sea, Maurya is too overcome with grief to witness the scene for herself. When his body is dragged from the water and delivered to the cottage, Maurya's visions are confirmed and she seems relieved to be done with mourning. She says, "it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely" (66). Her mysticism is such that she sees events before they take place, which is a trait commonly attributed to peasant characters at the Abbey. This not only idealizes the peasants by characterizing them as being in possession of traits not found among members of modern urban audiences, but it also contributes to the idea that the West is a space that exists outside of time. It further suggests that its inhabitants are not subject to the temporal rules that apply to Dubliners who live by train schedules and the standardized time of the modern world.

In Cousins' *The Racing Lug*, Nancy waits for her husband to return from a fishing voyage in the wake of bad weather. As in *Riders to the Sea*, she sits in the cottage and relies on her daughter to observe the outside world and report what she sees:

NANCY [*Listening*]: What's that? Did you call me, Chile?

BELL [*At window*]: The gulls are wheeling and crying, that's all.

[*Pause.*]

NANCY: There it's again, it's your father; he wants me to kiss him now he's

finished with the net. [*Trying to rise.*] Tell him I'm comin' in a minute. [*She sinks back down again.*]

BELL: Don't mind, mother; he'll come himself very soon.

NANCY: There he is. Wasn't that his step on the garden walk?

BELL [*With veiled anxiety*]: Not yet, not yet. It's only the waves making a tramping on the shingle. [*Pause.*]

NANCY: Ah, there he's now, and he's not alone. I hear footsteps [*Slowly rising, with a growing sense of dread, and weakening physically*], they are slow, heavy, like men at a funeral; it's a weighty creel they carry ashore. I can't hear his voice. Why does he stay? I must go and meet him. [*Tries to move away from the chair, but her limbs fail under her, and she sinks over the Bible and remains still.*] (47-8)

Like Maurya, Nancy experiences an extrasensory anticipation of grief. She cannot see her husband's limp form being carried from the water, and neither can her daughter from her place at the window. Nancy's knowledge transcends sight, which suggests that she possesses the same mystical qualities as Synge's matriarch. In both cases, the ability to see in the mind what cannot be seen with the eyes paints the West and its inhabitants as existing in a space that is other than real, other than modern, and outside the limitations of reality experienced by Dublin audiences. Cousins' reiteration of the Abbey's peasant archetype on the Theatre of Ireland's stage overshadows the inclusion of Presbyterianism and a Northern setting. Ultimately, Nancy's mysticism and superstition contributed to the reductive, homogeneous definition of Irishness as set forth by the Abbey playwrights.

In its formative years, the Theatre of Ireland had to decide whether to present a new nationalist aesthetic or adhere to Yeats's. During the planning stages of the theater, its founders declared their intent "to act and produce plays in Irish or English, written by Irish writers or on



Irish subjects and such dramatic works of foreign authors as (are calculated to) educate or interest the public in the higher aspects of dramatic art” (“Rules”). The inclusion of works by foreign authors was the only major point of deviation from the ILT’s manifesto, and when the time came to deliver on their promises, the Theatre of Ireland’s performances were “limited to peasant drama and Irish legendary work,” while “The expectations of more avant-garde, European or Irish drama ... were not met” (Vandeveldt “Alternative” 105). Rather, the Theatre of Ireland “chose to mirror the NTS” on the very stage where the NTS was performing their own versions of the peasant play. As Vandeveldt notes, “The Abbey stage had become their performance space, and the Abbey play their prototype” (105). Despite the fact that the Theatre of Ireland received support from nationalist newspapers and organizations, all they achieved by copying the Abbey aesthetic was redundancy. Furthermore, their adherence to Yeats’s version of nationalism confirmed his role as an image-maker for Ireland and the creator of Irish-Ireland.

Though the Theatre of Ireland failed to distinguish their own nationalist aesthetic on stage, their inability to acquire a fixed space in which to perform their plays proved more damning still. Theater spaces were scarce, and obtaining the rights to perform in one was of the utmost importance. Because they were unable to establish themselves in a dedicated theater space, the Theatre of Ireland was forced to move to a new venue nearly every time they planned a performance. The Abbey, on the other hand, was positioned in a fixed location in the heart of Dublin where audiences could easily find it. Perhaps more significantly, the NTS controlled the space, deciding who, aside from themselves, had the right to perform on the national stage.

Details of the physical space of the Abbey are significant as well. Ben Levitas notes that when the Abbey opened in 1904, “People approaching the building would have paused, perhaps to admire the two stained-glass panels lit from within, designed by Sara Purser, of Celtic nut

trees, symbolizing knowledge.” Inside the building, the walls were adorned with “large medallions exhibiting the city arms, the Irish harp, and other devices appropriate to the national character,” and “all the fixtures and fittings were products of Irish industry” (73). Every inch of decorated space within the theater boasted some symbol or representation of Irishness as rooted in Celtic origins. The National Theatre was designed to highlight a shared lineage which included the portion of the population that fit Yeats’s criteria, but which actively excluded others.

Being forced to move from one venue to the next was undoubtedly an inconvenience for the Theatre of Ireland, and it kept them from establishing a fixed presence in Dublin. Despite their contentious history with Yeats, they periodically rented the Abbey, though the Theatre’s archivist pointedly notes that “we were to get the Abbey as ordinary tenants—that is, by paying for it like anyone else” (“Notes”). Unfortunately, the space already occupied by Yeats and the NTS was “the best venue for the Theatre of Ireland’s productions,” and Vandeveldt notes that “Box office receipts were three times as high [at the Abbey] as when the company staged its first plays in Molesworth Hall, and twice as high as the 1907 Rotunda production” (“Alternative” 103). Yeats and the NTS had a distinct advantage over the Theatre of Ireland, and were able to wield power over their nomadic competition by either allowing or refusing the rental of the space.

In 1908, the Theatre of Ireland caught a break when William Mollison, an actor with his own traveling company, took notice of the work of one of their playwrights, Rutherford Mayne. Mollison invited Mayne and the Theatre of Ireland troupe to perform at Dublin’s Gaiety Theatre alongside his company, though “not even the Abbey Theatre company had performed in such a large, prestigious Irish Theatre” (Vandeveldt “Alternative” 107). As the performance

approached, however, an announcement was published in the Dublin newspapers that mistakenly identified the Theatre of Ireland as the Abbey Theatre Company. The Theatre of Ireland's records indicate that the "mistake [was] made either by the management of the Gaiety Theatre or by Mr. Mollison's management," but could be "in no way attributed to us" ("Reports"). The author of the records reports that he "hastened to interview Mr. Mollison," and "sent a correction (which was published) to every paper in Dublin" before considering the matter settled. In another letter to the press, Gregory "gave the company the benefit of the doubt," but Horniman was less forgiving (Vandeveldt "Alternative" 108). In a third published letter, she made known her intention to "refuse [the Theatre of Ireland] further hire of the Abbey Theatre," and demanded that they issue a formal apology, also to be published ("Reports"). When the Theatre of Ireland flatly refused her conditions, Horniman banned them from performing in the theatre that had brought them their greatest success, and they were forced to seek performance spaces elsewhere.

By the time this controversy occurred, the Theatre of Ireland's popularity had grown in Dublin even as Yeats's had suffered amidst rumors that his split from Maud Gonne's form of nationalism meant a departure from nationalist causes altogether. Public opinion was further influenced by Yeats's partnership with Horniman, whose Britishness became a point of contention among those who believed the Irish National Theatre should bear no trace of imperialist influence. Grappling for space, popularity, and authority within a limited urban environment posed an immediate threat to the NTS, and made them wary of their competitor's successes. Vandeveldt notes that, despite Gregory's gracious and public acceptance of the Theatre of Ireland's retraction, in private she "was annoyed that [their] members behaved at the Abbey Theatre 'as if the theatre belonged to them'" ("Alternative" 108). While a veil of civility existed between the two theaters, it is clear that only one could thrive in Dublin. In the Abbey's

quest to solidify their claim on the city, they resorted to ad hominem attacks in the press that were intended to discredit and embarrass the Theatre of Ireland, and which also provided the Abbey's directors with an excuse to ban them from the stage on which they had achieved great popularity.

### **The Ulster Literary Theatre**

While existing in close proximity to the Abbey proved challenging for the Theatre of Ireland, the Ulster dramatists struggled because of their distance from it. The ULT operated on the periphery of the Celtic Revival, looking on from Belfast. They had little or no ability to affect the nationalism being espoused by Yeats in Dublin and, aside from an annual trip to perform their work at the Abbey, were limited to presenting their notions of Irishness to the people of Belfast. The ULT's position outside of Dublin, and thus outside the immediate sphere of the Literary Renaissance, highlights the way distance operates as a means of maintaining power structures within the nationalist movement.

The ULT also inhabited the *cultural* periphery of the Revival, dealing with warring representations of Irishness that a predominantly Catholic, nationalist Dublin audience could easily ignore. Since Horniman refused to fund a theater that could potentially "[make] a contribution to an Irish uprising," Yeats and Gregory "[imposed] a 'no-politics' stipulation on their Dublin theatre company" (Frazier 75; Vandeveld "Open" 38). Vandeveld further notes that, "For them, as for most of the playwrights of the Irish National Theatre Society, nationalism was not a political notion but a cultural focus" (38). Ulster was an industrial center that was home to Protestants, Presbyterians, Catholics, unionists, loyalists, and nationalists; an accurate representation of Irishness in the North was far more complicated, and necessitated the inclusion of disparate factors in order to develop a nationalism that adequately represented its population.

Anxieties about Ulster's place in Irish-Ireland are made clear in the ULT's literary and critical magazine, *Uladh*. Like Yeats's *Samhain* and *Beltaine*, *Uladh* was a forum for poetry and drama, but also for theatrical reviews and commentary on the state of the theater in Ulster. In an article from the magazine's second issue, an anonymous writer says, "All over Ireland to-day men are watching and waiting on the threshold of a new revelation, but in that revelation, up to the present, Belfast has neither lot nor part" ("Ulster" 6). They hoped to become meaningful participants in the movement's future, and even if they "never produce an epoch-making play, or evolve a distinctive school of acting," they claimed their work "will not have been in vain" if it "aids, even a little, in breaking down the barrier that has so long divided the North from the South" (6). *Uladh* contains the self-conscious tone of an organization aware of its position on the margins of an important movement. In Stephen Gwynn's article, "The Northern Gael," he poses the question that has become central to the North in the wake of Yeats's construction of Irish-Ireland: "is Belfast, is Ulster, Irish?" (11). The nationalism of the South emphasizes "Gaelic and Catholic values [which] excluded a significant section of Ulster's population from dominant images of Irishness" (Duffy 77). The peasants of the Abbey plays are not Dubliners, but they represent the assumed homogeneity of the South while actively excluding the diversity of the North.

Michael Hechter notes that Yeats's reliance on Celticism as a unifying factor for the development of a heterogeneous nationalism is at the root of Belfast's sense of exclusion. He says, "Ireland...had a dominantly Celtic social organization, and hence a great many cultural features of these societies were similar. Northern Ireland, on the other hand, began as a new society organized around the establishment of a colony of English and Scottish settlers and many of its cultural traditions and practices were adopted from the core" (269). The physical and

cultural distance that kept the ULT from effectively participating in the revival was compounded by the fact that the North and South can claim different lineage; the two regions of Ireland faced the daunting prospect of uniting what were essentially two different countries before a single, homogeneous nationalism could accurately reflect all who claim Ireland as their nation.

Gwynn, writing in 1905, is acutely aware of the challenges posed to the ULT by the mere fact of their distance from the seat of the nationalist movement. He says:

When I call Dublin a metropolis ... I mean that it is the centre of a nation. In Dublin has centred the political movement by which Ulster has profited so greatly ... Dublin has become the centre of a very marked literary movement, which has drawn attentive and respectful criticism from England and the Continent ... What has Belfast contributed to this movement? (11)

He goes on to note that Leinster, Connacht, and Munster, without Ulster, would be “a pity of pities; for Ireland, wanting the hand of the North, will go maimed.” The consequences for Ulster would be far greater, however; a North “divorced from Ireland will be squalid, undignified, and contemptible” (12). The ULT not only perceives its position on the geographical and cultural periphery of the nationalist movement, but also acknowledges the possibility that they could easily be excluded from it. This anxiety led them to develop an aesthetic that attempted to be more than just a copy of the peasant plays that defined the concept of Irishness for the nation at the time.

Rather than rely on realism, as the Abbey’s playwrights did, the ULT turned to satire to critique the “decadence” of the Abbey aesthetic and their oversimplified notions of nationalism. In *Uladh*, the ULT acknowledges that they “have not attempted to define a school,” but suggest that “our talent in drama will be more satiric than otherwise” (2). And indeed, Christopher

Morash points out that most of the theater's success came through their use of humor: "Between 1904 and 1930, the Ulster Literary Theatre produced forty-seven original plays, of which only six were mythological plays; the majority were either political satires or rural comedies with a satiric edge, and these would be the company's most successful productions" (Morash 148). The ULT's persistence in presenting an alternative version of nationalism that ran parallel to Dublin nationalism was an important move toward destabilizing the idea that Irish-Ireland was representative of the entire nation. According to Graham, the performance of such alternative strains of nationalism "produces unofficial representations of place that subvert or challenge state-sponsored nationalism and its narrative of homogeneity" (7).

Among the satires that worked to challenge this narrative was Gerald MacNamara's *The Mist that Does Be on the Bog* (1908), one of the ULT's most popular plays. In *Mist*, MacNamara satirizes the Abbey aesthetic and breaks down the distances between both Dublin and the West, and Dublin and Belfast. A Belfast acting troupe drives out to the West of Ireland to rent a cottage where they can rehearse their peasant play—cheekily titled *What's All the Stir About?*—in "authentic" surroundings. Once they are disguised as peasants, they encounter what they believe to be a real version of the stage archetype of the wandering tramp, who asks to come inside and sit with them. It is soon discovered, however, that the tramp is actually a playwright from Dublin in search of his own authentic West, which he plans to use as inspiration for the peasant play he's currently writing.

The play begins in a cottage in Connemara that bears a striking resemblance to the cottage in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Synge's stage directions call for "*nets, oil-skins, spinning wheel, ... etc.,*" and the matriarch is positioned "*on a stool at the fire*" (61-2). In *Mist*, MacNamara specifies that the set should be dressed with a "*stool, table, dresser, spinning wheel,*

*fishing net, etc. on walls,”* and the matriarch should be “*seated at the fire*” (58). In what can only be interpreted as a jab at Synge’s reported obsession with the spinning wheel, the troupe has carted one all the way from Belfast to ensure their rehearsals will be as authentic as possible. As the play continues, enough similarities arise between the two works to make it obvious that MacNamara has targeted Synge’s play as the embodiment of the peasant play, and sets to work deconstructing its elements through the use of humor. He incorporates Synge’s treacherous sea, the threat of losing the family’s sole male provider, and the omniscient dread exhibited by the matriarch when she senses her son has died. However, where *Riders* is inspired by Synge’s time in the Aran Isles as a child, *Mist* relies on metatheatrical elements to draw attention to the fact that Synge’s script varies only slightly from the formula with which the Abbey had found such success. By staging the rehearsal of a peasant play in the midst of an actual peasant play, the ULT exposes the inauthentic conventions that make up the “reproduction of authenticity” being presented as the true West (Phelan 237).

*Mist* was performed for the first time during the ULT’s annual trip to Dublin, which means they not only performed it on the Abbey stage, which would have highlighted comparisons to Synge’s play, but that the Abbey directors were in the audience as well. The scene opens on an elderly couple, Bridget and Michael, sitting near the hearth in their cottage. The two bicker about who will collect turf from the bog and eggs from the henhouse before Bridget reminds Michael that he hasn’t put “the card” in the window. It reads, “To let – furnished,” and is intended to lure the urban Irish tourists who travel West in search of the Ireland of the Abbey stage (58). The conversation that follows reveals the basis of the satire being employed by MacNamara:



BRIDGET: Didn't Father Doran tell us and him just come from Dublin that all the quality in the big world do be searchin' the country over for cottages just like this – and them in their motor cars? [*motor horn toots.*]

MICHAEL: Preserve us if that isn't a motor at this present moment.

BRIDGET: Well – is it scared you are, Michael Quinn, scared of the sound of a motor and you never done talking about this 'scientific age' since you were made chairman of the new Technical School at Lisvarna? (58)

Here, the peasants of the West do not live in a state of precolonial isolation that keeps them frozen in time and place. These are not Arensberg's pre-industrial revolution peasants, but simply rural Irish people whose distance from the city has not rendered them imaginary or cut off from the world. Bridget's reference to Michael's fascination with scientific progress also makes it clear that MacNamara is not interested in perpetuating the sense of timelessness that is fostered in and disseminated by the Abbey's peasant plays; he thus frees the characters from the archetypal restraints that cast them as museum pieces. He liberates the landscape from this timelessness, as well; in Macnamara's west, roads exist which bring visitors from Ireland's urban centers, and tourists traverse the countryside in cars and trains. His peasants are aware of life in Dublin and are therefore within the reach of imperial influence, a fact which closes the distance between Dublin and the West still more.

*Mist* also functions to close the *cultural* distance between Dublin and Belfast. As the actors enter the cottage they are in raptures about its perfect alignment with the West they have imagined:

GLADYS: [*To Bridget*]: Good evening, Ma'am.

BRIDGET: *[Rising from her seat]*: Good evening, kindly lady, it's welcome you are, but it's a wild and stormy day, God bless us, to be out in the mountain side with the white mists driving up like shrouds from the rocky shores of Lough Corrib.

CISSIE: This is just the sort of place I have always pictured in imagination – we *must* stop here.

GLADYS *[to Cissie]*: Do be quiet, Cissie – if the old woman hears you, she is sure to put up the price.

CISSIE: But isn't the old lady 'awfully folk'? Wasn't that grand about the 'white mists'? (59)

Despite their Ulster origins, the actors objectify the peasants in the way they have been taught to think of them: as archaic symbols of an Ireland of the past. Cissie's remark that the peasant cottage and surrounding countryside align with the West she has "always pictured in imagination" suggests that the collective imagination that created and populated the cultural landscape of the Celtic Revival encompasses all of Ireland, and not merely Leinster. This in turn indicates that the Abbey aesthetic has spread to encompass all of Ireland, though Cissie's patronizing description of the peasant woman as being "awfully folk" suggests that its function within the nationalist movement has been to oppress Ireland's disparate factions by failing to represent the variety of lived experiences throughout all four provinces.

Even as MacNamara's characters adhere to the tenets of the Abbey aesthetic, he uses their acceptance of Yeats's tropes to deconstruct the peasant play. As they begin to rehearse *What's All the Stir About?*, MacNamara calls attention to the genre's overused formula:

CISSIE: Don't *you* sit over by the turf fire? *[Stops.]* Oh, Gladys.

GLADYS: What's the matter?

CISSIE: The fire is on the wrong side – it should be left.

GLADYS: You silly – sure there's no audience. You can turn the other way.

CISSIE: [*Laughs*]: That is stupid of me. (60-1)

Gladys and Cissie inhabit the cottage as they would a set on a stage, but even as they act their parts within the cottage set, the audience is made aware of its own place within the Abbey, and even of its location in the urban landscape of Dublin. Gladys's remark that "there's no audience" draws attention to the fact that there *is* an audience, and Cissie's insistence that the fire is on the wrong side of the stage makes that audience aware of the conventions of the peasant play in which the set remains structurally the same from one play to the next. Audience members watching Cissie and Gladys gush over the details they recognize from urban stages are forced to contemplate the synthetic construction of the stage sets, which draws them out of the action of the play and makes them aware of their physical surroundings. Ultimately, the audience's awareness of place and self serves to break down the Abbey aesthetic and draw attention to their complicity in crafting the imagined West. MacNamara continues to employ this strategy as the women carry on with their rehearsal:

GLADYS: ... [*Starts in a whining tone*] Is Cornelius back yet?

CISSIE: [*At [spinning] wheel*]: He is not back, but the silver moon is only in its first quarter yet, and he might be delayed by the grace of the saints in O'Hanlon's pub.

GLADYS: I say, Cissie – I'm not quite happy about that word 'pub.' I think I'll have to change it.

CISSIE: Not at all – it's all right – they use it in the Cloister Theatre – go on. (61)

Here, MacNamara situates Cissie and Gladys's Belfast theater within a network of Irish theaters that rely on each other to develop a set of shared, specifically Irish tropes. He portrays the absurd stereotyping that takes place by means of repeating and thus reinforcing the peasant archetype even as he closes the distance between Dublin and Belfast by showing the shared use of such archetypes among theaters in a diverse Ireland.

MacNamara's use of parody extends to the tropes normalized by the Abbey aesthetic. As Gladys and Cissie rehearse *What's All the Stir About?*, they make clear references to the ideas of omniscience, women's sacrifice, suffering, and dread that appear in Synge's and Cousins' works. Here, however, the metatheatrical context of such references highlights the occasionally absurd theatricality of such tropes rather than to reinforce traits of the tired peasant archetype:

GLADYS: Do you think [Cornelius] will be comin' home by the long gap, and  
the wind risin' up from the north east and him burdened down by the weight  
of drink?

CISSIE: It's by the white rocks he would come, and him staggerin', the way he  
could steady himself against the south wind.

GLADYS: Cornelius ashore, it's this day and it will be this night that I will be  
lamentin' for you and you with the price of the heifer on you ... whist – what  
is that I hear out in the darkness?

CISSIE: It's nothing but the screech of an owl over McGrath's barn or maybe the  
falling of the white flakes of snow on the frosty sea.

GLADYS: I'm thinkin' it's neither the one thing nor the other, for my old  
withered heart keeps tellin' me it's the voice of my son in distress this night.

*[Tries to get up from her seat but sits down again.]* Go to the door, Moira, and tell me if you see a sign of my son, for it's hard set I am to walk. (61)

Here, as Abbey audiences watch the Belfast actors don the mantle of peasanthood to rehearse the play-within-a-play, the familiar conventions are not tragic, but funny. In a line that echoes the style of Bridget's poetic description of "the mists driving up like shrouds from the rocky shores of Lough Corrib," Cissie's lines are dramatized to the extent that meaning is sacrificed for the sake of pretty-sounding words. An audience member listening closely might note that snow falling on water—if it makes a sound at all—certainly could not be confused with the screech of an owl. Gladys's character, for her part, worries about the safety of her son as he traverses the rocky terrain that runs alongside the sea. In *Riders*, Maurya has lost eight male relatives to the sea, and she understands that nature both provides for her family and senselessly takes their lives. Gladys's character, however, does not attribute her fear to the temperamental sea, but to the simple and preventable fact that her son is staggering along a precipice while "burdened down by the weight of drink." By deliberately misusing the tropes of the peasant plays, MacNamara calls attention to them. This, in turn, calls attention to the impossibility of portraying a precolonial West, and highlights the way the Abbey playwrights have caused those parts of Ireland that fall beyond the pale of Dublin to become detached in both space and time.

Brian Graham says, "Ireland profoundly demonstrates [that] power cannot be conceived outside a geographical context; social power requires space, its exercise shapes space, and this in turn shapes social power" (4). Yeats wielded power at the center of the Dublin nationalist movement and made use of his geographical and physical location at the center of the Literary Renaissance to attempt to unify Irish culture. Though Yeats labored to establish an Irish-Ireland with a fixed identity, Phelan notes that "authenticity is never stable or fixed" (236). The

construction of Irish-Ireland based on “Gaelicism and Catholicism” was no more than a “supreme imaginative achievement that began to dissolve in ... the 1960s” (Graham 7). The Theatre of Ireland and the ULT attempted to destabilize not only the Abbey’s position at the center of the Irish theater scene, but Yeats’s role as creator of Irish-Ireland; they were only marginally successful.

Today, the Abbey continues to serve as Ireland’s National Theatre while both the Theatre of Ireland and the ULT have long since disappeared. Only recently have scholars begun to consider the ways in which these and other theaters struggled to represent Ireland and the Irish experience during the Celtic Revival. These theaters have been ignored in large part because they never managed to usurp the Abbey’s role as National Theatre. By failing to do so, the Theatre of Ireland and the ULT ensured that their work would never be studied as extensively as work produced at the Abbey. S. E. Wilmer explains that “national theatre historians usually privilege the work of the National Theatre ... as the main exponent of theatrical expression within the nation ... Irish theatre histories ... virtually ignore the work of [other] popular theatres in Dublin at the turn of the century ... and concentrate almost exclusively on the work of the National Theatre” (18). The fact that National Theatre productions are preserved, archived, and included in the nation’s history as a marker of a specific cultural moment means that other theater is less necessary to the retelling of Ireland’s move toward independence. For this reason, Ireland’s smaller theaters are often relegated to footnotes that highlight the Abbey’s centrality and importance to the Celtic Revival.

Because neither the Theatre of Ireland nor the ULT managed to gain a firm foothold in the Celtic Revival, both companies faded into obscurity in the second decade of the twentieth century. The Theatre of Ireland’s commitment to running their theater as a democracy was a

response to events that followed the ILT's conversion to a Limited Liability Company. However, where the NTS's leadership was confined to Yeats's "autocratic" dictation, the Theatre of Ireland had no clear leader. As a result, those involved in the company began to think of their participation as optional and simply stopped showing up for rehearsals, and "the quality of both the performances and their finances began to disintegrate" (Trotter 30). In this way the Theatre of Ireland quietly dissolved, and was out of business by 1912. For its part, the ULT became the Ulster Theatre in 1911, which marked the first of several reorganizations that took place within the company during its slow decline. It disappeared altogether in 1934 when political tensions and a general lack of interest among younger generations proved too great an obstacle for its directors. Nevertheless, both rival companies participated in an effort to heterogenize Yeats's narrow version of nationalism and succeeded in presenting alternative aesthetics that broadened Ireland's dramatic identity.

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